

Chapter 10

Military Construction



Completion of most of the work on the 9-foot channel and the coming of World War II slowed down civil works in the Rock Island District. Total expenditures for new work and maintenance in fiscal 1942 was \$2,494,719.98. As with the rest of the country, the District shifted to the war effort—specifically, to military construction.

Prior to World War II, building construction for the Army had been done by the Quartermaster Corps. It soon became apparent, however, that the Quartermaster did not have an ongoing, adequate organization to handle a sudden large increase in construction. Here is where the Corps of Engineers' involvement in civil public works made good military sense. Because of their work on America's waterways, the Engineers had both the staff and experience to engage in large scale construction projects. Especially important was their long experience in working with contractors. Contractors knew the Corps of Engineers, and the Engineers knew which contractors could do which jobs. Consequently, in 1940 all Air Corps construction and all work on the Atlantic island bases were assigned to the Engineers; on December 1, 1941, Congress assigned all military construction to the Engineers.¹

Because of their more strategic locations, the St. Louis and Chicago Districts carried out most of the military construction work in the Upper Mississippi region. The St. Louis District supervised construction of about \$500,000,000 worth of facilities,² while the Chicago District, located in the Great Lakes region, an important manufacturing center, supervised some of the largest Corps military projects.³ In addition, Chicago became the headquarters for a procurement district that included 12 states and went far beyond the boundaries of the Chicago District.

Nevertheless, the Rock Island District did undertake a significant amount of military construction and, as with the other Engineer efforts, it amazed those for whom the construction was being done by the rapidity with which it adapted to military construction. During each of the war years, the Rock Island District procured over \$270,000,000 worth of supplies and equipment. During 1942 personnel at Rock Island designed and constructed more than \$80,000,000 of military projects.

Most of this work was carried on by civilian personnel and by private contractors, but several District employees were commissioned into the Engineer Corps and a number of reserve officers were transferred to Rock Island to supervise various aspects of construction. One of these civilian employees was John Peil, chief of the planning section. In July 1942 Peil was commissioned as Major in the Engineers and in February 1943 he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and reassigned as District Engineer at Rock Island for the duration of the war.

The Rock Island District's first military construction project was for the Rock Island Arsenal. Even before the war began, District personnel were working on preliminary plans to expand several facilities at the Arsenal to meet the increased needs of the Lend Lease program. The District had already designed and constructed a badly-needed new forge shop before the war began.

The first of the wartime projects at the Arsenal was an administration building constructed in 1942. A cafeteria constructed in a rehabilitated shop building followed, along with several underground machine gun testing ranges and two new buildings, Nos. 208 and 209.

Across the Mississippi from the Arsenal, in Bettendorf, Iowa, the Engineers took charge of a tank arsenal project begun by the International Harvester Company for the Ordnance Department. The Quad Cities Tank Arsenal was set up in the old Bettendorf Car Shop where a foundry already existed and whose heavy equipment could be easily transferred from making railroad cars to tanks. In setting up this project, Engineers had to move the Bettendorf Company, which was making equipment for the Navy, to an Engineer-constructed building in Moline, Illinois.

The 94 M3 Grant tanks produced at Bettendorf were designed by the Rock Island Arsenal as part of a series which eventually led to the design of the Sherman tank. The Quad Cities Tank Arsenal was plagued from the beginning with problems ranging from constant design changes to suppliers who were months behind. In addition, the tanks were made of riveted plate stock and the British troops who used them found them extremely vulnerable.⁴ Finally no sooner was the facility finished than the Government found itself with an excess of tank-producing plants, and production soon shifted to tracked personnel carriers.

Only one World War II facility was designed and constructed entirely under the supervision of Rock Island District personnel: the Green River Ordnance plant at Amboy, Illinois, built in 1942-43. As with all major military projects, the Green River plant was designed and built by contract from Government specifications. Nevertheless, construction of the plant required a large supervisory force for which an area office was set up at Dixon, Illinois.

Other major military construction projects supervised by the Rock Island District included Schick

General Hospital at Clinton, Iowa. Built from standard military specifications, Schick was the only hospital built by the District under wartime conditions. Following the war, however, the District supervised construction of two hospitals for the Veteran's Administration at Iowa City, Iowa, and Madison, Wisconsin.

The Rock Island District performed some additional military construction at the Ordnance Proving Grounds at Savanna, Illinois, where it built several Igloos, semi-buried munitions storage buildings. District personnel also built the first Women's Army Corps training camp in the United States at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, refurbishing several old buildings and constructing several new ones.

To reach all of these scattered military projects, the Rock Island District assembled a vehicle fleet of about 300 pieces, including 57 brand-new 1942-model Pontiac and Chevrolet station wagons and sedans.

Following the end of the war in 1945, the District returned to civil works. Since then, military construction within the District has been carried out by the Chicago District, and more recently, by the Omaha District. The Rock Island District has remained entirely with civil works programs.

Notes

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1. Fine, Lenore, and Jessie A. Remington, *The Corps of Engineers: Construction in the United States, United States Army in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1972), pp. 440-476.

2. Frederick J. Dobney, *River Engineers on the Middle Mississippi A History of the St. Louis District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers* (U.S. GPO, 1978), p. 108.

3. John Larson, *Those Army Engineers, A History of the Chicago District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers* (Washington, D.C., GPO, 1980), pp. 261-268.

4. Interview with Robert Clevenstine, June 21, 1973. This and other information in this chapter comes from brief District records, but primarily from Robert Clevenstine and Frank W. Ashton who were in charge of various aspects of military construction for the Rock Island District during World War II.